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Dave

(1)

Dear Dave:

I suppose you've read in the papers about this guy Don Nichols. Of course, he's an old buddy of mine. We used to go kidnappin' broads together all the time. No, seriously: He may be a man after my own heart, but it's hard to tell from the limited information in the newspapers. I read about the son's trial in the paper, but not yet about the old man's. Don't know if it's taken place yet. I suppose they'll probably execute him. Speaking of executions, here's your Spanish passage:

From Thomas Carlyle's The French Revolution. Esto describe lo que le aconteció a Robespierre al cabo del levantamiento contra él.

"Robespierre estaba sentado en una silla con una bala de pistola tirada no a través (across) de la cabeza, sino a través de la mandíbula (jaw); la mano suicida había fallado. ...

"Al pie del cadalso (gallows) le tendieron [a Robespierre] en el suelo (ground) hasta que llegase su turno. Cuando le levantaron, sus ojos volvieron a abrirse; echaron (cast) de ver el hacha sangrienta. Samson[1] le arrancó la chaqueta (jacket); le arrancó de la mandíbula el sucio (dirty) lienzo (cloth); la mandíbula se cayó como paralizada, se lanzó (threw) de él un grito (roar), horrible de oír y de ver. Samson, ¡no puedes ser demasiado pronto[2]!"

Por contraste, mira el comportamiento de Anacharsis Clootz, caudillo de la "facción extranjera" de revolucionarios, exterminada bajo el régimen de Robespierre:

"Clootz portavoz (spokesman) de la raza humana... Clootz, todavía con aire de sarcasmo elegante... rogó que le ejecutasen por último 'para comprobar ciertos principios'."

[1] "Samson" era el apodo (nickname) del verdugo (executioner). [2] I'm not sure this sentence is idiomatic. to be sure I have it right, perhaps I should say: "no puedes acabar demasiado pronto tu tarea", though this is less smooth and succinct.

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By the way, I ought to mention that in any travels we might make into the desert, my range may be limited by a problem I have at the nape of my neck with the muscles that hold the shoulders up. Carrying a load supported by my shoulders for any length of time generates an increasing amount of pain. I've seen 2 doctors about it and apparently there's not much that can be done for it. What seems to have happened is this: I often used to carry a very heavy pack and after some time I'd get a pain there. But of course I would just keep marching on stoically. But evidently that wasn't such a good idea because the place where those muscles are attached to the bone seems to have become sensitized, so that after a few years I found the pain would start more quickly and with a lighter load. By the time I decided I had better take it easy with that kind of stuff, it was already at the point where a load of only a few pounds, if carried long enough, would start causing pain, so it was impossible to avoid the problem altogether.

Since the thing seems to gradually worsen with continued abuse, I'll naturally want to avoid straining it any more than necessary. This means that on any trip where we have to carry all our drinking water, my range will be pretty limited. In flat country, however, we might be able to get hold of a couple of old bicycle wheels and some pieces of lumber and knock together a little cart for carrying water. That way we could take a lot more water than we could carry on our backs anyway.

Speaking of water transportation, how are you set

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for containers? I may be able to bring some plastic jugs that contained cooking oil, if we'll need them.

Shit, the way the weather is this year, if you want to take a walk in the desert, maybe you should come up here instead of me going down there. It has been so dry that at the anthropology museum at the University of Montana they had to give a drink of water to their Egyptian mummy.

Just got your last two letters. I too have heard encouraging things about rattlesnakes. If you want to avoid being bitten, you just carry with you a thin stick about 4 feet long. When a snake strikes at you, you just give it a sharp blow on the tip of the nose with the stick. This not only deflects its strike, but discourages it from making any further attacks. It should also be remembered that in order to bite, a snake must first open its mouth. Thus, to prevent snakebite, you encircle the snake's snout with thumb and forefinger and exert firm pressure. This prevents the snake from opening its mouth and so renders it harmless.

If by some freak of fate both these preventives fail and you do get bitten, danger to life can be avoided by instant amputation of the affected limb, as this prevents the poison from spreading through the body. Thus one should always carry a large meat-cleaver when in rattlesnake country.

As for that herpetologist who says only .2% of rattlesnake bites are fatal — this certainly conflicts with other statistics I've read. I think I read a few years ago that some 15% of rattlesnake bites are fatal. A possible explanation of the discrepancy is this: the 15% figure

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probably referred to untreated bites, while the ~2% figure is probably a recent statistic including all rattlesnake bites. In practice this would probably refer almost entirely to bites that have been treated by the latest medical techniques, since relatively few people venture far into the isolated places and most who are bitten no doubt are able to get to a hospital within a few hours, at most. For someone bitten in an isolated place and far from a vehicle, perhaps the 15% statistic would apply.

Also, bear in mind that non-fatal rattlesnake bites can permanently cripple the limb that is bitten, or even force its amputation, since the poison causes great local destruction of tissue.

Finally, the herpetologist may well have been biased in his account since he was probably out to convince people that they shouldn't go around indiscriminately killing snakes as pests. So if I were you I wouldn't go and get overconfident about rattlesnakes.

The only allergic reactions I've heard about in connection with snake bites are to the antivenin used in treatment and not to the venom itself.

Hmm — I wonder what could be all these mysterious "obligations" you speak of. Oh yes — there was the soirée at Mrs. Van Pederastie's, the reception at the Snobson — Pismeyers', and then the governor has been pestering you for an interview for the last 6 months and you felt you had to work him into your schedule somehow. Ho hum — these routine social obligations are so tiresome.

I found anything but comforting your remarks

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that were intended to show that it isn't so dangerous to eat in Mexico. You remarked that you know a few people who've eaten in Mexico in your general area, and none of them got anything — and you added that if they'd gotten either of the 2 most common parasites, they certainly would have known it. This implies that the 2 most common parasites are pretty nasty. As for several people not having gotten anything — yeah, sure, I know lots of people who've smoked for years and they haven't got cancer yet. You can't draw any conclusions about the probability of getting infected from a few cases of people who may merely have been lucky. Also, you do mention 2 people who did get amoebic dysentery, and one of them has recurrences of it. I certainly have no desire to get stuck with an apparently chronic recurring ailment — not to mention the risk of cysts in the liver or brain.

I simply can't afford to get sick. If you stop and think about it for a minute, you'll see how serious it would be for me if I did get sick: I can't afford to pay doctor bills. If the sickness were anything but minor, it would be difficult if not impossible for me to get employment to get money for doctor bills. Further, if I were sick enough so that it would be too much of a strain for me to ride a bicycle 9 miles (4½ miles each way), I wouldn't even be able to make visits to the doctor. Not to mention carrying out tasks that are absolutely essential, like cutting firewood, tending my garden, etc. Only people with money can afford to get sick.

I flatly refuse to eat or drink anything in Mexico unless I cook it or boil it myself — except

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that canned or bottled stuff may be alright — especially if it is imported from the U.S. — and edible plants gathered far from human habitations, roads, or streams should be O.K.

I don't see how this is going to offend the Mexicans. If we don't walk into a restaurant in the first place, how are they going to be offended that we don't eat the food there? You say Mexicans are hospitable. But I can hardly imagine they are so hospitable that they would invite home to dinner people who merely ask them how to get to such-and-such a place or whether it is permitted to travel and camp in such-and-such a desert area, or things of that sort. What were you planning to do, play anthropologist or something? Fuck, I don't even get chummy with gringos, my own countrymen — why should I get chummy with Mexicans? By the way, according to this book I have, Colloquial Spanish, it is the Latin-American custom, when eating anything in the presence of anyone else, to offer some to the other person, holding up the food and saying "¿Le gusta?" This even when the other person is a complete stranger. But, such offers are purely formal and are not to be accepted. You just answer "Buen provecho, señor", which may be loosely translated as "enjoy it". The author says that when he first got to Latin America and was inexperienced, he got himself into an embarrassing situation by actually accepting one of these purely formal offers.

As for my arrival time, how about if I come in early February? That way I can rest from my bus trip for a couple of days, we can spend a few days looking Mexico over without venturing into the desert, and then by the

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time we're ready to take any sort of a hike, it would be about mid-February, which should suit you, since you said the times when you prefer not to take a hike are between Thanksgiving and mid-February.

You asked what my interests were in visiting you. I'll try to explain. First, bear in mind the background: This area here is all fucked up — I mean a lot worse than before. The best places are logged off, too many people, etc. So: one of my motives for wanting to visit you is simply a change of scene. Beyond that, you could say I am looking for something like a ray of hope. I'd like to see if there's still a place — e.g. northern Mexico — where the culture has still not been completely taken over by the worldwide technological-industrial "culture" (if you want to call it that); and where there are still wild places that are not immediately threatened with ruin by, on the one hand, those who want to exploit them for profit, and, on the other hand, those who want an escape from the city but insist on bringing the city with them by building themselves fancy summer cabins equipped with all the urban comforts.

You say I won't find purer wilderness in your area than in my area. Don't be too sure of that. You haven't seen how many new cabins there are along Poorman Creek now, or how the best places have been logged off. Be that as it may, it would be a satisfaction to me to see an area in which such wilderness as there is, is surrounded by a culture that has not yet been entirely taken over by technology. Of course, if there are wilder areas of desert further to the south, it would be nice to find them out, if practical considerations permit this. I'm not especially interested (at present, anyway) in venturing far into such areas — I'd just like to know if they actually exist. Similarly, I'm not particularly interested in getting chummy with

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Mexicans or in delving into their culture, but I'd like to see to what extent (if any) a non-technological culture still exists in N. Mexico.

At present I'm not especially interested in any very ambitious hikes in the desert, though of course I'd like to get out into the desert enough to see what it's like.

Now, I've written this in response to your question about my interest in exploring the desert vs. exploring Mexican culture. I'm certainly not insisting on doing things my way. We'll compromise between your interests and mine. But is it really necessary to plan out all this in detail? Why not wait till I get down there and then go by feel, so to speak?. As far as I know, the only stuff we have to plan out in advance is stuff that requires certain preparations, e.g., my date of arrival, so you know when to come and pick me up; passports or other documents to bring; medical precautions; snakebite stuff or any other such equipment you think I should bring.

I can't say I find attractive your suggested hike that involves crossing the Rio Grande, because (1) you say we'd <u>try</u> to find a place shallow enough to cross. What if we can't find such a place? Screws up our hike, right? We could swim, but not with our packs. (2) A couple of guys who were seen "sneaking" across the Rio Grande in an isolated place would presumably be objects of suspicion. Is it actually legal to do what you suggest? Even if it's legal, if we were "caught" at it by U.S. or Mexican authorities I imagine we would be detained and questioned. If we weren't doing anything illegal, presumably it would turn out alright in the end, but I would find any such incident extremely upsetting and wouldn't want to risk it.

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If I'm not coming till February I guess that leaves us reasonably ample time to discuss all this crap.

According to what I've read, giardia is Not usually killed by chemical treatment of water — boiling is needed.

I thought of a possible solution to the problem of offending Mexicans by refusing food. You don't seem to mind taking the risk. As for myself, I could get a little bottle of plain sugar pills at a drug store and carry them along. If we get into a situation where it seems possible we might be offered food, I'll take out the little bottle and pop a pill into my mouth, making sure I'm seen doing so. If anyone then offers food, I'll say, "Muchas gracias, señor, pero estoy enfermo; sólo puedo comer una dieta especial." I know this sounds ridiculous, but actually I think it's a good plan. The only problem is, I don't know if I could keep a straight face.

—Ted

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